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Last Train Home

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http://www.pbs.org/pov/lasttrainhome/film_description.php 

Film Description

In the opening shots of **Last Train Home**, as the camera pans over a paved empty lot, then across a sea of people jostling behind barriers and finally into a surging river of humanity, the film plunges the viewer into an extraordinary phenomenon. China's booming economy depends on the single largest migrant work force in the world: 240 million people who have left their homes and villages to seek work in urban factories. The scale of this internal migration, and the social turmoil it brings, is never more visible than in the workers' annual return to their families and villages for Chinese New Year. So many millions on the move is a testament to the determination of Chinese workers to reconnect with family and tradition. It also exposes a nation under stress from rapid economic development and massive social change.

Among those millions are husband and wife Zhang Changhua and Chen Suqin who, 16 years earlier, left their village in Sichuan Province — and left their children in the care of grandparents — to work in the city of Guangzhou, 1,300 miles away. Their contact with their children was reduced largely to telephone calls and the annual New Year's reunion. While the great spaces of China, alternately empty or crowded with anxious tides of people, are always present, **Last Train Home** is most intimately the story of the Zhang family, who are fated to reach for the promise of the new China and discover its wrenching cost.

Last Train Home catches the Zhang family at a critical juncture in their struggle to better their lives — or more accurately, the lives of their children. The parents left their village of Huilong when their first child, a daughter, Qin, was only a year old (a son, Yang, would follow). The children were left in capable and caring hands, but the Zhangs' decision to go was a heartbreaking one made by millions of Chinese parents who felt they had, as Suqin puts it, "no choice." Like the Zhangs, many have traded a poor but perhaps psychologically secure life of subsistence farming for long, relentless hours of work in city factories and residence in rudimentary dorm-like structures.

In Guangzhou, the Zhangs sleep in bunk beds and cook their meals on the floor. By day, they make jeans for export to America. "Some jeans are huge!" one worker remarks. "You can fit two people in them." Factory wages, modest as they are, allow parents to send money home so their children can stay in school. The Zhangs believe that gaining the education they themselves don't have is the only way for Qin and Yang to have prosperous futures. It is, in fact, the guiding principle of their lives.

This makes what happens to the Zhang family all the more tragic. The factories where the Zhangs work, the dorms where they live, might exist in any developing nation. But the mass journey home for the New Year is distinctly Chinese in the sheer numbers of people involved; their stubborn attachment to tradition clashing with their ambition for new lives; and their endurance. The New Year also reveals a developing nation whose emerging infrastructure is already overwhelmed. Among the film's most harrowing and truly nail-biting scenes are those of the Zhangs and countless others struggling

After a long, snaking train journey through China's harsh and beautiful mountains, then a bus ride on local roads and finally a trek on foot, the Zhangs arrive in Huilong to find the family, for which they have been working so hard, is unraveling. Mourning the loss of her grandfather and disenchanting with school, 15-year-old Qin is sullen and bitter toward her parents for abandoning her and her younger brother, Yang. The parents' repeated explanations of how they were forced to leave for the good of their children seem to carry little weight. Their exhortations for Qin stay in school and make the most of it seem only to irritate the teenager. The first of the two New Year holidays that frame **Last Train Home** brings the Zhangs' dreams crashing down. In an ironic twist, Qin decides to leave school and, like her parents, go to Guangzhou to find factory work.

In Guangzhou, the parents hope a taste of factory life will cure her of her mistake. But Qin, though shocked by the labor and more than a little lonely, is exhilarated by a new sense of freedom and the ability to make her own money. The three decide to travel together back to Huilong for the New Year, the parents hoping the girl will have decided that school is better than a factory. This second New Year journey in **Last Train Home** turns into an agonizing five-day trial of physical and mental endurance, which, among other terrors, reveals just how great the gap is between mother and daughter.

In Huilong, tensions shockingly and disastrously boil over. Qin has no intention of returning home and going back to school, and she hasn't forgiven her parents for leaving her. She curses them and has a violent confrontation with her father. In the denouement of this terrible holiday, Qin takes off for the city of Shenzhen, just north of Hong Kong, where she finds work in local clubs and begins enjoying another part of the new China — a bustling city filled with shopping malls and young, stylish inhabitants.

In Guangzhou, meanwhile, the Zhangs tearfully resign themselves to losing Qin. They then make another fateful decision — Suqin will return to the village to give Yang the attention that might keep him in school. This will leave Changhua alone in the city as the sole support of the family. The decision to attend to one crack in the family's unity only opens another. It's another instance in which the Zhangs, like millions of other Chinese, have "no choice."

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